THE
WRONGED ONE
Ethan Campbell

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They say the old Morgan house burnt on a night when the moon hung like a bloodied coin in the grey, suffocating sky. It was a structure of rotting timber and weeping stone, clinging to the edge of the hill like an unwanted memory. On that dreadful evening, with the autumn air thick with the stench of pitch and dry rot, the righteous folk of the valley gathered to watch the culmination of their own malice.

They remembered the mockery of his trial. They recalled the crooked magistrate, the hysterical whispers of the village girls, and the false testimonies bought with tarnished silver. They had cheered his condemnation with a feral, collective hunger, throwing jagged stones at his bent, bruised back as they dragged him through the mud towards the makeshift gallows erected in his own orchard. He had offered no resistance then, only a silent, piercing stare that made the bravest among them look away.

But the hempen rope never touched his neck. Before the noose could be tightened, a sudden, unnatural tempest struck, and a bolt of lightning ignited the dry thatch of his roof. The fire claimed him first—or perhaps, as the terrified onlookers later whispered in the safety of their locked homes, Jon had summoned the fire himself to deny them their sport.

They say Jon Morgan walked directly out of those roaring, white-hot flames. His flesh was running like hot tallow down a guttering candle, sloughing off in weeping ribbons to reveal the gleaming, blackened bone beneath. His eyes, once a gentle, studious blue, were gone, replaced by two spitting coals dragged from hell's own furnace. Yet, he moved with a terrifying, deliberate grace, entirely untouched by the agony of the heat.

He did not scream. Instead, he laughed, a low, rattling sound that curdled the fresh milk in the dairy-sheds and stopped the very hearts of infants in their cradles. He pointed a blistered, skeletal finger at the cowering crowd, his burning gaze locking onto those who had watched his trial and shouted for his execution.

"You judged me by the measure of your own rot,"

Jon whispered, yet his voice carried over the roar of the inferno, sharp as a razor. "You sought to ash my name to hide your own filth. But I shall write my vengeance upon your flesh, and your children shall choke on the smoke of my memory."

He spoke words that should never have passed human lips, syllables of an elder tongue that twisted the very air and turned the grass to black ash beneath his melting feet. The fire that consumed his ancestral home seemed to leap outward, not to burn their bodies, but to consume his accusers' souls, leaving them hollow, screaming husks.

The official record states:

"Jon Morgan, convicted of witchery and consorting with unholy powers, perished in a conflagration of unknown origin. Case closed."

The official record is a lie, as most official records are. But the truth, the screaming, bleeding, blasphemous truth, is something far worse than any lie could ever hope to be. For the fire never truly went out, and Jon Morgan is still walking.

I.

The cellar of the Morgan house had become a damp, subterranean temple dedicated to things that should never have crawled from the abyss. Jon Morgan knelt upon the cold, sweat-slicked flagstones, tracing the final, intricate symbol with trembling fingers. The chalk he employed was not of this earth; it was a greasy, phosphorescent substance salvaged from a meteor fall, leaving a trail that seemed to actively drink the surrounding darkness rather than dispel it. The circle was now complete, nine concentric rings, each meticulously inscribed with jagged, unsettling characters from pre-human languages that had died out long before mankind first raised its eyes to the stars.

"It is time," Jon whispered. His voice was no longer the resonant baritone of a scholar, but a dry, rasping thing, like dead autumn leaves skittering across a moss-covered tombstone.

At the circle's cardinal points, tallow candles sputtered. Their illumination was entirely wrong; they cast a pale, violet light that was not true flame, but a cold, semi-liquid luminescence. It pulsed with a sluggish, rhythmic heartbeat that made the heavy air in the cellar thicken, growing putrid with the suffocating odour of ozone, damp earth, and ancient rot.

Jon Morgan had been a normal man once. He had been a respected herbalist and antiquarian, albeit one whose private library contained volumes best left unread. For decades, his neighbours in Ilfort had tolerated his eccentricities, dismissing his reclusive habits as the harmless quirks of an academic. That tolerance dissolved in the biting winter of 1886, when the first child vanished.

It began with the Miller girl, found shivering and mute in the deep snows of the woods behind the Morgan property. Days later, the Cooper twins were discovered huddled in a hollow log, their eyes wide and glassy with an unspeakable terror. Their young minds were utterly shattered, reduced to babbling incoherent fragments about "the man with the burning hands" and "the whispers that crawl up from the floorboards."

The townspeople did not wait for the law. They came for Jon in the dead of night, armed with iron bars, torches, and a righteous, unthinking fury. The trial that followed in the cramped, draughty courthouse was a mere formality, a thin veneer of civilised theatre draped over the scaffold of mob justice. The evidence was entirely circumstantial, born of hysterical gossip and old superstitions, yet the verdict had been decided before Jon ever took the stand.

"To the gallows with the warlock!" the gallery had roared. Jon remembered looking down from the wooden dock, staring into the twisted, hateful faces of people he had known for years. He had healed their sick, mended their fractures and shared their tables, yet now they clamoured for his blood with the savagery of wolves.

But they had not accounted for the books. They had not searched his home thoroughly enough to find the hidden compartments beneath the floorboards, where lay the ancient, leather-bound grimoires that seemed to shift and writhe when left unobserved. These were texts that detailed the fragile nature of reality, describing how our world is merely a thin membrane stretched over an ocean of hungry, slumbering gods.

Jon had memorised the words of the ultimate pact. As the rough hemp of the noose was settled around his neck and the wooden trapdoor creaked beneath his boots, he had closed his eyes and spoken the forbidden syllables. He did not pray for salvation; he demanded vengeance. When the hatch dropped, the rope did not snap his neck. Instead, a column of black, freezing fire had erupted from the earth, consuming the gallows, scorching the executioner to ash, and carrying Jon away into the safety of the shadows.

Now, he stood in the reconstructed cellar, his flesh still bearing the horrific, charcoal-grey patches of that miraculous, terrible night. His lungs burned with every breath, yet the power thrumming through his veins was intoxicating, a second, icy heartbeat that told him he was no longer entirely mortal. He had become a hollowed-out vessel, ready to be filled by the terrible forces waiting just beyond the threshold of human perception.

"Come to me," Jon intoned, his hands raised, his fingers clawing at the empty air. The chalk lines on the stone floor began to glow with a blinding, sickly radiance. "Come to me, you whose very name is the shattering of human sanity. Come to me, you who hunger for the sweet souls of the self-righteous.

Come to me, and I shall lay before you the feast you have craved for aeons!"

The air in the centre of the room did not merely warp; it split open like a wound.

With a sound like tearing silk amplified to a deafening shriek, the space between the violet candles tore apart. What lay beyond was not a physical vacancy, but an active, suffocating negation of light—a shifting, non-Euclidean void. From this tear emerged an entity that defied description. It possessed angles that violated the laws of three-dimensional space, a colossal, shifting mass that seemed to occupy no physical area whilst simultaneously filling every corner of the cellar. It was a presence that pressed against Jon's mind with the agonizing weight of a deep-sea trench.

"I am here," the shape spoke.

The voice did not travel through the air; it erupted simultaneously from the stone walls, from the darkness of the corners, and from inside Jon's own skull, vibrating the very marrow of his bones. "What is it you offer us, little, flickering candle?"

Jon's knees buckled. He collapsed onto the flagstones, not out of reverence, but because his ner-

vous system had simply ceased to function under the sheer pressure of the entity's gaze. He clawed at the stone, forcing his jaw to move through sheer, desperate willpower.

"The town," Jon gasped, saliva dripping from his cracked lips. "Ilfort. Every soul that slumbers in its beds. The ones who judged me, the ones who cheered for my death, the ones who turned their backs. Their minds, their flesh, their sanity—I offer it all to you. Consume them. Warp them into screaming mockeries. Just give me the strength to tear their world down."

The shifting void pulsed, a wave of unnatural, freezing cold washing over the cellar. Jon felt a slimy, intangible tendril slide effortlessly through his thoughts, examining his memories, his grievances, and his deepest, darkest hatreds.

"You wish to hurt them," the entity observed, its tone conveying a terrifying, cosmic amusement. "You wish to make them bleed as you have bled. How delightfully small. How utterly petty. Yet, it pleases us to grant these fragile, mortal whims. The souls of the vengeful always taste of the most exquisite bitterness."

A thread of pure, absolute darkness detached itself from the rift and struck Jon directly between the eyes.

A choked scream tore from his throat. His consciousness exploded outward, expanding far beyond the stone walls of his cellar. Suddenly, he could perceive the entirety of Ilfort sleeping under the heavy summer fog. He could see the Miller girl tossing in her fitful sleep; he could hear the rhythmic breathing of the judge who had sentenced him; he could feel the pulse of every beating heart in every timber-framed house. He saw the fragile, gossamer threads of sanity that held their minds together and he saw precisely where to pull to make the entire tapestry unravel into madness.

"Go," the entity commanded, its voice fading as the rift began to heal. "Go and sow your harvest. We shall be watching. We are always watching."

The tear snapped shut with a sharp pop, leaving Jon alone in the damp cellar. He slowly stood up, his boots leaving black, charred footprints upon the timber stairs as he began his ascent.

The house above had been rebuilt after the fire, not by the hands of carpenters, but by the unseen, whispering things Jon had summoned from the dark. It

stood now as a monument to wrongness; its corridors were slightly too long, its ceilings subtly pitched at angles that made the eyes ache and the stomach turn.

Jon stepped to the grimy parlour window, looking out over the valley. In the distance, the gaslights of Ilfort flickered peacefully in the night, oblivious to the doom that had just been unleashed.

"Tonight," Jon whispered, his eyes burning with a cold, violet fire. "Tonight, you will finally learn what it means to wrong a warlock."

II.

The dreams began three nights after Jon's ascension. They descended upon the sleeping residents of Ilfort simultaneously, a synchronized, suffocating nightmare that left the entire town waking in cold sweats, their throats raw from screams they could barely remember uttering. It was not a gradual onset, but a sudden, violent plunge into a shared abyss.

Professor Alistair Finch of Miskatonic University was among the very first to realise that something had gone terribly, irrevocably wrong. He sat in his study, the amber glow of a single oil lamp casting long, skeletal shadows across the towering bookshelves that lined the walls. For weeks, a quiet but relentless compulsion had gripped him, an itch at the back of his mind that demanded he dig through the university's restricted archives. What he discovered there, buried beneath decades of dust and deliberate neglect, chilled him to the very marrow of his bones.

It was the Morgan case.

The official municipal records were laughably sparse, reduced to a few sterile lines about property disputes and a sudden, tragic fire. But the unofficial accounts—the leather-bound diaries of long-dead town physicians, the frantic letters of terrified clergymen, and the whispered, half-lucid confessions of the elderly in their dying hours, painted a picture of something far more sinister than a simple, tragic witch trial.

There had been a child, you see. A young girl, scarcely seven years old, who had been found wandering the dense, whispering woods of the Miskatonic valley. Her mind had been utterly shattered, her eyes wide and glassy, staring at things no one else could perceive. Worse still was her skin. It was covered from collarbone to ankle in intricate, jagged symbols that no local scholar could interpret, symbols that seemed to shift slightly under the skin when the light caught them.

The physician's log described her final days in harrowing detail. She had spoken in a dry, rattling whisper of "the man with the burning hands" and "the deep voices that sing from underground." She had survived only three days, her body eventually con-

sumed by a raging, unnatural fever that the doctor swore made her blood boil in her veins, hissing as he attempted to bleed her to reduce the heat.

And Jon Morgan, the accused, the condemned, the man who had supposedly perished in the roaring flames of his own homestead, had been seen since. Many times. Always at the absolute edge of human vision, always just beyond the reach of clear sight, but always undeniably there. A silhouette lingering in the heavy autumn fog. A shifting shape in the chimney smoke. A cold presence that made the skin crawl and the hair on the back of the neck stand on end.

"Impossible," Finch muttered to the empty room. His voice sounded thin, fragile against the heavy silence of the house. His hands trembled violently as he closed the heavy vellum ledger, the dust rising like a funeral shroud in the lamplight. "He died in that fire. He must have."

But that night, the dreams came for him too.

In the dream, Finch did not arrive; he simply *was*. He was standing in the damp, subterranean chill of the cellar beneath the ruined Morgan house. The air smelled of wet earth, rot, and something metallic,

like copper pennies resting on the tongue. All around him, carved into the rotting wooden beams and the weeping stone walls, were the symbols. They were not static; they moved, writhing and pulsing like living, blind parasites feeding on the dark.

Before him stood the shape. It was a mass of shifting, impossible geometry that hurt the eyes to look upon directly, the very air warping around its silhouette. When it spoke, it did not use sound. The voice bypassed his ears entirely, echoing with a sickening, wet resonance directly inside his skull, speaking to his very soul.

"You see the truth now, don't you, Alistair?" the shape asked, the thoughts dripping into Finch's mind like venom. "You see what lies beneath the thin, fragile surface of your rational world. You see what swims in the cold, empty spaces between your atoms."

Finch tried to recoil, tried to scream for help, but his jaw was locked. His throat produced only a wet, choked gurgling sound as the air turned to liquid lead in his lungs.

"You see what dreams in the black silence beneath your feet," the entity continued, its presence expanding until it filled the room, pressing against Finch's

chest with suffocating weight. “The Morgan man is but my servant. He does my work. He prepares the soil. And when his task is complete, I shall rise from the depths and claim this wretched place as my own. You and all your kind shall be my playthings. My nourishment. My eternal torment.”

The cellar dissolved, melting away into a kaleidoscope of grey and black. Suddenly, Finch found himself standing in the center of Ilfort’s town square. The sky above was a bruised, starless purple. Surrounding him were his neighbours, his colleagues, the people he exchanged pleasantries with every morning.

But they were no longer themselves.

Their eyes had been hollowed out into empty, weeping sockets. Their mouths had stretched far beyond human limits, gaping holes that leaked a thick, tar-like black ichor down their chins. They were swaying, their bodies moving in a sickening, rhythmic unison. A low chant rose from their throats, a guttural vibration that seemed to make the very flagstones beneath Finch’s feet tremble.

“Jon Morgan,” they chanted, a chorus of the damned. “Jon Morgan. Jon Morgan.”

Slowly, with the agonizing deliberation of a nightmare, the empty-eyed horrors turned their heads toward him. The chanting stopped. In the sudden, awful silence, they began to advance.

Finch woke with a throat-shredding scream that shattered the quiet of the house, bringing his wife running in terror from her adjoining bedroom.

"Alistair! My God, Alistair!" she cried, flinging the door open.

She found him collapsed on the rug beside his bed, his limbs wracked with violent, rhythmic spasms. His eyes were rolled back so far that only the yellowed, bloodshot whites were visible. She fell to her knees, desperately trying to hold him, to revive him, but his mind was lost in a vision that refused to release its icy grip.

Through the blinding haze of his seizure, Finch saw one final, terrible image.

The dream-cellar returned, and with it, the shifting shape. But now, the chaotic mass of darkness had a face... a face that Finch recognized instantly. It was the face that had stared back at him from the faded

photographs and charcoal sketches in the university archives for the past three weeks.

The face of Jon Morgan.

Only now, Finch understood with absolute, mind-shattering clarity: it was not a face at all. It was a mask of pale, stretched flesh. And behind that mask, peering through the eyeholes, was an ancient, unfathomable void, something that could not be comprehended by human sanity, something that shattered the delicate machinery of the mind with a single, fleeting glance.

Professor Finch was found dead the following morning.

He lay slumped against his desk, his face frozen forever in an expression of absolute, paralyzing terror. His hands were still curled like claws, frozen in the act of trying to tear his own eyes from their sockets.

The coroner, a practical man who preferred simple answers to quiet his own growing unease, would later rule the death a stroke, a catastrophic cerebral haemorrhage that had ended the professor's life in a merciful instant. It was a diagnosis the town readily accepted, desperate for any shred of normalcy.

But they ignored the truth written on his skin.

Beneath the collar of his nightshirt, carved with precise, superficial cuts into his chest, were the symbols. They were the exact same jagged, impossible glyphs that had been carved into the Miller girl's flesh so many decades ago. They told a different story, a story of a man who had dug too deep, who had understood too much, and who had been permanently silenced for his curiosity.

The town of Ilfort had begun to die, and as the autumn wind howled through the empty streets, no one else knew it yet.

III.

Sarah Newell had been an uncompromising sceptic all her life. She had laughed outright at her grandmother's old-wives' tales of salt over shoulders and horseshoes nailed above lintels, rolled her eyes at the local historical society's sensationalised accounts of seventeenth-century witches and woodland demons, and dismissed the infamous Morgan case as nothing more than a tragic, textbook example of Puritan mass hysteria run amok.

But that was before the dreams began.

Her dreams were fundamentally different from the frantic, sweating nightmares of her neighbours. She knew this because she had recently begun to compare notes, speaking in hushed, desperate whispers over garden fences and across grocery store aisles. What she discovered from those trembling conversations made her blood run cold. In their dreams, the

townspeople were the quarry, chased through twisting alleys by unseen horrors. In her own dreams, Sarah was no victim. She was an active, monstrous accomplice.

Every morning, she would awaken shivering from vivid visions of the subterranean Morgan cellar. Her hands would be blackened to the knuckles with a greasy soot that was not quite soot, and her parched mouth tasted overwhelmingly of bitter wood-ashes and metallic copper. She could still hear Jon Morgan's voice echoing inside the chambers of her mind, whispering precise, chilling instructions, promising grand, archaic rewards, and threatening unthinkable punishments. With each passing night, she felt the shape's presence like a physical pressure against her soul, a suffocating, leaden weight that grew heavier and more demanding with every tick of the clock.

"The harvest has finally begun, Sarah," Jon had told her in the latest dream, his voice scraping against her thoughts like a rusted blade. "The soil is rich with their terror. And you shall be my chosen reaper."

Sarah had not wanted to become a reaper. She had not wanted any part in this madness. Yet the dark shape had selected her for reasons that remained agonizingly unclear. Perhaps it was because she was

Ilfort's preeminent archivist and historian, the one person responsible for preserving the very town records Jon wanted utterly erased from human memory. Perhaps it was because her own lineage traced back to Magistrate Newell, one of the three judges who had condemned Jon to the flames. Or perhaps, most terrifyingly of all, the ancient shape simply found her mind an amusing thing to break.

Whatever the cosmic calculus, Sarah now found herself standing in the centre of the cobblestone town square at the stroke of midnight. A massive, rusted scythe rested in her hands, a heavy implement of slaughter she had no memory of picking up. All around her feet, the horribly mangled bodies of her neighbours were piled in grotesque mounds.

She watched in absolute, detached horror as her hands moved of their own volition. The scythe rose and fell in a sickening, rhythmic arc. Crimson fountains of blood sprayed across the cold, wet cobblestones, catching the pale glint of the autumn moon. She tried to scream, to weep, to beg for mercy, but her voice was no longer her own. It emerged from her throat as a deep, guttural chant, an incantation of harsh, prehistoric consonants that she did not understand, yet which resonated with a vibrating power

that seemed to shake the very foundations of reality.

"More," Jon's disembodied voice whispered from the surrounding shadows, slick with malicious glee. "The harvest is not yet complete, girl. Feed the circle. Feed the shape. Feed the ancient one who waits in the dark."

Sarah's hijacked body marched purposefully toward the grand, neoclassical town hall, where the remaining survivors had barricaded themselves behind heavy oak doors. Even from the steps, she could hear their muffled screams, their frantic, overlapping prayers, and their desperate, useless pleas for divine deliverance. She could smell their absolute fear, a cloying, copper-sour scent that made her stomach turn in violent revulsion.

But her hands continued their flawless, mechanical work, and the scythe continued its terrible, graceful dance.

Inside the building, the survivors were huddled tightly in the historic council chamber, their faces stark white under the flickering gaslamps. Among them was Mayor Harrison, a pompous man who had historically been the most vocal in Jon's public condemnation. He had thrown the symbolic first stone

at the accused warlock, had shouted the loudest for a public execution, and had personally overseen the hasty construction of the gallows.

"Please," Harrison whispered, his manicured hands shaking violently as his eyes remained fixed on the heavily barred doors. "God preservation us. Please, just let us survive the night."

The massive oak doors exploded inward with a deafening crash, splintering into kindling.

Sarah stood framed in the ruined doorway. Her clothes were utterly drenched in blood that was not her own, and her eyes glowed with an eerie, phosphorescent inner light that caused the survivors to shriek in unison. As she raised the dripping scythe, the shape's monolithic voice echoed directly inside every human mind in the room.

"Jon Morgan," it intoned, a low, vibrating hum that rattled the windows. "Jon Morgan. Jon Morgan."

To their horror, the survivors began to chant along with the unseen entity. Their voices rose in a discordant, terrifying harmony. They could not help themselves; the forbidden words were being violently pulled from their throats by an invisible, suffocat-

ing force they could not hope to resist. They could only watch, their rational minds screaming in silent, claustrophobic agony, as their own bodies utterly betrayed them.

"Jon Morgan," they chanted, tears streaming down their pale faces. "Jon Morgan. Jon Morgan."

The scythe fell with blinding speed, and the historic council chamber was instantly transformed into a literal slaughterhouse.

Yet Sarah was no longer truly there to witness the harvest. She was elsewhere, trapped in a dark, forgotten corner of her own consciousness, watching through a warped window made of the shape's translucent, oily substance as her physical body carried out its grim, murderous purpose.

From this mental vantage point, she suddenly saw Jon. He was standing in the very midst of the carnage, his charred, blackened face split in a hideous smile that stretched far too wide to be human, his hollow eyes burning with a hellish, sourceless fire. He was visibly drinking in the airborne fear, the agonizing pain, the absolute horror of the dying, breathing it in like wine, savouring the suffering like a decadent meal.

"Yes," Jon whispered, his voice trembling with sadistic ecstasy. "Yes, this is exactly what I envisioned. This is what they all deserve for what they did to me. Every last one of them."

The amorphous shape pulsed in sudden, violent satisfaction, and Sarah felt something vital crack deep inside her psyche, some final, desperate psychological barrier that had been holding back the black tide of madness. She felt her sanity crumble like dry bread, felt her mind shatter into a thousand jagged fragments that would never again be reassembled.

And through those widening cracks, something else entered.

Something that had been patiently waiting for this exact moment of total fracture.

Something that had merely been wearing Jon's vengeful face, but was not Jon Morgan at all.

"Oh, my sweet, fragile little puppet," the shape purred in her mind, and Sarah realized with a dawning, cosmic horror that it had been using the warlock all along. Jon's obsessive quest for earthly revenge was nothing more than a clever pretext, a convenient means to a much larger, darker end. "How long

I have waited for a night like this. How long I have dreamed of tasting the delicious, ripe souls of this wretched town."

Jon's charred face suddenly twisted in profound confusion. He looked around the room, his fiery eyes widening. "What? What do you mean by that? This is *my* harvest. My righteous revenge. My—"

The shape laughed. It was a sound that was not a sound, but something far worse, a psychic vibration that made Sarah's soul curl in on itself like a wounded animal.

"Your revenge?" the entity mocked, its voice expanding until it filled the sky above Ilfort. "Your petty revenge is nothing but a primitive tool. A convenient key to unlock the gate. You truly believe you summoned me from the void, Jon? You believe you possess power over a god? I am the one who summoned *you*. I am the ancient one who has been waiting centuries for a suitable vessel, a conduit, a blind, prideful fool who would open the door and let me walk the earth again. And you ...oh, you were absolutely perfect. So beautifully full of hate. So utterly blind with fury. So incredibly easy to manipulate."

"No!" Jon gasped, reaching frantically toward his chest.

But even as he screamed, the black shape was already withdrawing from his spirit, pulling away like a dark tide retreating rapidly from a ruined shore. And without its borrowed, supernatural power, Jon felt his resurrected body begin to instantly disintegrate. The hellfire that had remade him had only been loaned, and now that the debt was called in, he was left with nothing but the ash of his own historical cremation.

He fell heavily to his knees, his charred flesh sloughing off his frame in wet sheets, his blackened bones cracking and splintering under their own weight. He tried to speak, to beg, to plead for a mercy he had never shown, but his voice was entirely gone, along with everything else that had once made him a threat.

"Thank you, little warlock," the shape echoed, and now its monolithic voice was everywhere, pressing against every human mind left alive in the valley, squeezing, twisting, and breaking. "Thank you for showing them the door. Thank you for preparing the soil. Thank you for being such a wonderfully useful little puppet."

Jon Morgan died for a second time in a pathetic pile of ash and bitter regret, his revenge left forever unfinished, his soul damned to a cosmic oblivion far worse than any human punishment could ever devise.

The shape turned its terrifying, undivided attention back to the remaining survivors, those few huddled in the corners of the council chamber who had not yet been physically harvested. Their minds were already entirely broken, their bodies barely functional. They would serve nicely as the first of its new subjects, the very first to experience the eternal horror that was to come.

Sarah Newell felt the ancient shape enter her completely, filling every empty space left by her shattered mind. She felt her original identity dissolve like salt in boiling water. She felt the last, desperate vestiges of her selfhood crumble into absolute nothingness. She was no longer Sarah Newell, the historian. She was something else entirely, a cosmic anomaly that merely wore her face and spoke with her voice, but was not her in any meaningful sense.

The shape stretched its new limbs, tilted Sarah's head back, and let out a long, shuddering breath.

“Ilfort,” the entity whispered through her stolen lips, staring out the window at the darkened hills. “Sweet, delicious Ilfort. How I have dreamed of this night. How I have longed for this feast. And now ...now, you are mine. All of you. Forever and ever and ever.”

IV.

Three long weeks had crawled past since the shape's blasphemous revelation, and Ilfort had swiftly degenerated into a claustrophobic theatre of nightmares made manifest. The cobblestone streets, once bustling with academics and eccentric tradesmen, were now utterly empty of sane men. The colonial buildings housed only those wretched souls whose minds had been utterly shattered by the entity's suffocating presence. They wandered aimlessly through the mist, their eyes hollow voids, their lips moving in silent, frantic prayer to a detached god that did not exist.

Those few who had possessed the foresight to flee had done so in the earliest hours of the descent, before the shape had fully established its psychic dominion. Terrified and breathless, they had fled to the authorities in Boston, to the major newspapers, to anyone who would grant them an audience. But their accounts, frenzied tales of shape-shifting hor-

rors lurking in the alleys, of chanting townsfolk gathered in subterranean covens, of a localized darkness that seemed to actively consume the lamplight, were dismissed with pitying smiles as the ravings of madmen.

"Too many have had their minds broken by this collective hysteria," one senior Boston official had remarked, shaking his head as he neatly filed away a deposition. "It's a tragedy of public health, to be sure, but we cannot deploy the militia based on ghost stories. The town of Ilfort is lost to its own isolation."

And so, abandoned by the civilized world, Ilfort was left to its grim fate.

Yet, one man remained, a man named Thomas Blackwood, a professor of comparative religion at Miskatonic University. He had been away on an extended lecture tour in London when the descent first began. He had returned to find the grand library of his university looted, his colleagues either dead or hopelessly mad, his students scattered like leaves to the autumn winds, and his carefully ordered world in absolute ruins.

Blackwood was by no means a brave man. He was a creature of comfort, a scholar who had always pre-

ferred the safety of his velvet-lined study to the physical dangers of field research. But something buried deep within his conscience would not allow him to board the next train out of Essex County. Perhaps it was a crushing weight of guilt; he had known Jon Morgan, had long suspected the man was dabbling in forbidden esoteric texts, and yet he had done nothing to intervene. Perhaps it was intellectual hubris; his scholarly mind had been piqued by the terrifying implications of the shape's power, and he desired to comprehend it before the end. Perhaps it was simply a quiet death wish, a final desire to meet the cosmos on his own terms rather than waiting for the inevitable.

Whatever the hidden catalyst, Blackwood now found himself standing at the edge of the desolate town square. He held his brass lantern high against the encroaching fog, his knuckles white around the grip of a service revolver resting heavily in his overcoat pocket. The scene before him was one of pure, unadulterated chaos. Bodies lay precisely where they had collapsed during the initial panic, their rigid faces frozen in expressions of agonizing terror. The cobblestones were stained with a thick, iridescent black ichor that seemed to pulse with a slow, rhythmic heartbeat of its own. The heavy autumn air was

thick with the suffocating stench of decay, mingled with something far worse, something ancient, metallic, and terribly hungry.

"The shape is here," Blackwood muttered, his breath misting in the unnatural chill. "I can feel the pressure in my skull. Even now, it watches. It waits."

He forged ahead through the narrow lanes, avoiding the corpses as best he could, deliberately averting his gaze from the glassy eyes that stared up at him from the gutters. He was searching for something, he could not have articulated what, precisely but a primal instinct assured him he would recognize it upon arrival.

And then, looming through the grey vapour, he saw it: the Morgan house. It stood at the edge of the residential district like a malignant tumour on the New England landscape. Its timber walls seemed to subtly writhe and warp when viewed from the corner of the eye. Its windows were not merely dark; they were absolute voids. From the depths of its foundations emanated a low, vibrating hum, a sound that made Blackwood's blood freeze instantly in his veins.

It was the unmistakable sound of countless souls screaming in unison.

Blackwood approached the property with immense caution. The very ground beneath his boots felt fundamentally wrong, as though the soil had been transmuted into a gelatinous matter less stable than solid earth. Each step sank slightly into the turf, giving him the sickening impression that the planet itself was attempting to swallow him alive.

The heavy oak front door hung wide open. Beyond the threshold lay a darkness that defied natural philosophy; it was not a mere absence of light, but an active, aggressive void that seemed to drink the illumination from the air. The wick of Blackwood's lantern flickered violently, dimmed to a dull orange ember, and for three agonizing heartbeats, he was plunged into absolute, suffocating blindness.

Then, with a sharp hiss, the light flared back to life, and he beheld the entity.

It was not the lesser shape Jon Morgan had originally summoned. That entity had been a mere servant, a vanguard, a herald of the greater cataclysm. This manifestation was the supreme source itself. This was the cosmic archetype of which all other horrors were mere shadows. This was the entity that had waited patiently beneath the crust of the earth,

dreaming through aeons beyond human comprehension, and it had finally awakened.

"I am called by many names in your fragile histories," the shape said. The words did not travel through the air; rather, they manifested as a crushing weight against the interior of Blackwood's cranium. "But your limited intellect may call me the Devourer. For that is my function. That is what I have executed since the dawn of time. And that is what I shall continue to do, until the last stars grow cold and the carcass of the universe grows still."

Blackwood parted his lips to speak, to demand answers, but his vocal cords failed him entirely. He attempted to draw the revolver from his pocket, but his nervous system refused the command. He stood frozen, utterly helpless, his mind a turbulent whirlwind of existential terror and academic fascination.

"You have sought me out to understand," the shape continued, its form shifting between impossible geometric dimensions. "You have come to witness the truth. And the reality is this: your civilized world is nothing more than a thin, fragile skin stretched precariously over a bottomless abyss. I am that abyss, Professor. I have always been that abyss. And I shall

remain, long after your fleeting kind has been ground to dust and scattered across the uncaring void."

The entity advanced, expanding outward, and Blackwood felt the final tethers of his sanity begin to fray. He saw things that no human eye was designed to process; he comprehended mathematical equations that insulted logic. He watched the grand history of the cosmos unfold in a single, blinding flash, the violent birth of stars, the cooling of ancient worlds, the pathetic rise and fall of forgotten civilizations. He saw that all of human achievement had been a mere prelude to this very moment of total consumption.

"Enough," Blackwood whispered, the word tearing from his throat as he forced his body to break the psychic paralysis. "I have seen enough. I understand your truth. And I know now what a man must do."

With a sudden, desperate lurch, he reached into his left pocket—not for the useless iron of his firearm, but for a small, salt-encrusted leather pouch he had carried since his return. It contained a meticulous, traditional mixture of coarse sea salt, fine iron filings, and the consecrated ashes of protective herbs. It was a primitive ward, gleaned from medieval grimoires, but his lifelong studies suggested it held a specific disruptive frequency against non-Euclidean entities.

The shape emanated a sound like grinding mountains, a terrible, mocking laugh.

"You truly believe that trinket will save you?" it mocked. "You think a handful of dust can harm a god? I am older than your world. I am older than your sun. I am..."

With a wild cry, Blackwood cast the contents of the pouch directly into the shimmering, unstable core of the entity.

The reaction was instantaneous and cataclysmic. The shape unleashed a high-pitched scream that shattered the windowpanes for miles around and caused the foundations of the house to buckle. It recoiled violently, its vast form twisting and fracturing as the ancient chemical combination disrupted its localized density.

"Impossible!" the entity shrieked, its cosmic voice splintering into discordant frequencies. "This flesh should not possess the key! This..."

But Blackwood was already turning on his heel. He had never harboured the delusion that the mixture would destroy the Devourer; that was a fairy tale. But he had prayed it would grant him a fleeting window

to escape, to document the horror, and to warn the rest of humanity of the shadow creeping out from Essex County.

He burst through the shattered doorway and sprinted into the foggy streets, his lungs burning in the icy air, his heart hammering against his ribs. Behind him, the entity's howling rage echoed through the valley, a physical weight that threatened to crush his spine. He ran past the vacant houses, through the hellscape of his youth, until he finally crossed the outer jurisdiction line of Ilfort.

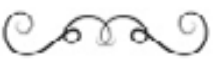
In the far distance, the mundane, flickering lights of Boston offered a fragile promise of sanity. Blackwood collapsed against a stone marker, his breath coming in ragged gasps as the entity's grip on his soul finally slipped away.

He slowly turned his head to look back.

The physical structures of Ilfort still stood beneath the moon, but the town itself was dead. The essence had been utterly extracted. What remained was a hollow husk, a permanent gateway where the shape had taken root.

"This is only the beginning," Blackwood whispered

into the dark, tears streaming down his weathered face. “The Devourer has only just begun to feed. It will grow. It will spread. And soon, no corner of the earth will be safe from its hunger.”



V.

Blackwood arrived in Boston to find a grand city utterly paralysed by a cold, suffocating terror. The refugees fleeing the ruined streets of Ilfort had brought their harrowing tales with them, and though the state authorities issued frantic, hollow denials, the rumours had already taken deep root in the public consciousness. The railway stations were scenes of absolute bedlam; families fought bitterly for space on outbound carriages, whilst others simply fled on foot, dragging their worldly possessions along the dusty turnpikes towards the hills of New Hampshire, the Berkshires, anywhere that promised a temporary sanctuary from the encroaching dark.

But Blackwood knew, with a grim and heavy certainty that chilled his very bones, that there was no real sanctuary left. The shape was not a localized plague to be quarantined within the borders of Ilfort.

It had merely been resting there, temporarily tethered by the specific geometry of its initial summons. Given time, given the abundant harvest of human agony, and fed by the raw panic now flooding the commonwealth, it would inevitably expand. It would devour Boston, swallow the sprawling tenements of New York, and eventually drag the entire world down into its silent, sterile void.

He spent his first three nights in the city scouring the gas-lit taverns and shadowed universities, quietly gathering those few who still possessed the courage to resist. They were a motley, desperate assembly: decorated soldiers whose eyes remained haunted by the muddy slaughters of the Great War; pale, bespectacled scholars from Harvard who had spent decades translating forbidden, mouldering texts; and eccentric mystics who had long trifled with the fringes of the occult. They met in the damp cellar of an abandoned warehouse near the harbour, where the scent of salt water mingled with the sharp tang of fear.

"Conventional munitions will not serve us here," Blackwood addressed the damp room, his voice echoing off the brickwork. "The shape does not possess flesh to tear or blood to spill. But our ancestors were not entirely defenceless. There are older weapons,

forged in the violent crucible of creation, that can strike at its very essence."

Corporal Reeves, a grizzled veteran with a face scarred by shrapnel, stepped forward from the shadows, his heavy hand resting instinctively on his service rifle. "With respect, Mr Blackwood, we're soldiers, not sorcerers. How do you propose we destroy something that defied artillery at Ilfort? How do you kill a nightmare?"

Blackwood paused, the flickering candlelight casting long, distorted shadows across his pale face. The honest answer was a terrifying vacancy. He had poured over the ancient, worm-eaten folios for sleepless weeks, yet the texts were maddeningly evasive on the subject of permanent eradication. They spoke at length of binding circles, of complex wards, and of agonizing banishments—but never of outright destruction. The entity was simply too ancient, too vast, and too deeply woven into the fundamental fabric of reality to be snuffed out by mere mortals.

"We destroy it with the one thing its existence cannot tolerate," Blackwood replied, striving to project a confidence he did not feel. "We destroy it with the truth."

"The truth?" muttered one of the scholars, a frail man named Dr Arkwright, scoffing softly. "What academic platitude is this? Will we read it a sermon?"

"Not a sermon, Doctor," Blackwood said sharply. "The truth of its own limitations. The entity survives by convincing us of its absolute, omnipotent divinity. But it is bound by cosmic laws older than itself. If we can force it to confront the reality of its own boundaries, we can sever its anchor to our world."

They set out for Ilfort at the grey break of dawn, travelling in a small convoy of sputtering motorcars. The late autumn countryside had already begun to rot under the shape's unseen influence. The roadside oak trees were hideously contorted, their branches weeping a thick, black sap; the crows that watched them from the stone walls were misshapen, sporting extra, useless wings. The few travellers they encountered along the road were hollow-eyed, shuffling like sleepwalkers, their spirits utterly broken by the psychic weight pressing down upon the county.

By the time the convoy reached the mist-shrouded outskirts of Ilfort, their numbers had been halved. The psychological pressure had proven too immense. One of the young mystics had succumbed to a sudden, shrieking fit of madness, throwing himself from

a moving vehicle into a ravine. Two of Reeves' soldiers had simply vanished into the creeping fog during a tyre change, leaving only their rifles behind in the damp grass.

Yet, Blackwood and the hardened survivors pressed forward on foot, entering the dead heart of Ilfort. The silence of the town was deafening, broken only by the crunch of shattered glass beneath their boots. They reached the cobbled town square, and there, suspended in the very centre of the civic space, they confronted the horror.

The shape had grown monstrously since Blackwood had last looked upon it. It towered far above the church steeple, a colossal, shifting mountain of absolute darkness and impossible, non-Euclidean geometry. It pulsed with a sickening, iridescent violet light that hurt the retinas, radiating a numbing cold that felt paradoxically like a burn.

"So, the little insects return," a voice echoed, not through the damp air, but directly inside their skulls—a sound like grinding tectonic plates and dying screams. "You have travelled back to the slaughterhouse to witness the final curtain. You have come to be digested, as all temporary anomalies must be."

“Now!” Blackwood roared, defying the psychic pressure that threatened to rupture his blood vessels. “Begin the cadence!”

Blackwood raised his trembling hands, and the remaining survivors formed a ragged circle, locking arms. Together, they began to chant. It was not a language of men, but a rhythmic, guttural succession of syllables passed down through forgotten civilisations—a song of the Earth’s first dawn, preserved by those who had watched the stars fall.

The shape instantly recoiled. Its perfectly sharp edges began to blur and wobble.

“What is this?” the voice screamed in their minds, vibrating with sudden, chaotic panic. “This frequency is forbidden! It was erased from the annals of the cosmos! It was...”

“It was preserved!” Blackwood bellowed, his eyes burning with a strange, fierce light. “Hidden in the deep places of the earth! Waiting for your return!”

The chant swelled, a defensive wall of ancient sound. The shape began to contract violently, its colossal mass folding in upon itself like a collapsing star. The sky above Ilfort cleared, the oppressive pur-

ple twilight retreating before the steady, golden light of the morning sun.

"NO!" the entity shrieked, its form dissolving into a chaotic vortex of shadows. "I am eternal! I cannot be contained by..."

With a final, thunderous crescendo of the chant, the link was severed. The vortex imploded with a sharp, vacuum-like crack, leaving behind only the cold autumn breeze and the empty, ruined square of Ilfort.

Blackwood collapsed onto the damp cobblestones, his lungs burning, his nose bleeding freely. Corporal Reeves knelt beside him, his face pale and slick with sweat.

"Is it... is it finished, sir?" the soldier whispered, looking up at the empty sky.

Blackwood slowly shook his head, his voice a dry rasp. "No, Corporal. It is never finished. We have merely closed the door and locked it for a season. The shape still waits in the dark spaces between the stars. And one day, some curious fool will unlock it again."

VI.

Thirty years have passed since the desperate resistance at Ilfort. Slowly, agonizingly, the town has rebuilt itself from the ashes of its near-destruction, rising like a fragile monument over the bones of its past. The scars, however, remain. They are etched into the cracked masonry of the rebuilt town hall, woven into the hushed tones of the elders, and buried deep within the soil. The horrors of that fateful descent have been documented in leather-bound journals locked away in vaulted archives, studied by those with the fortitude to look, and analyzed by minds that desperately sought logic in the utterly illogical. The chant—that rhythmic, guttural invocation that once tore the veil of reality apart—has been preserved. It is passed down from generation to generation like a loaded weapon, a heavy and terrifying heirloom.

Yet, the shape has not been forgotten. It does not merely linger in historical texts; it whispers. It drifts through the drafty corridors of Ilfort's homes, slip-

ping into the dreams of the sleeping townsfolk. To the bitter, the broken, and the desperate, it promises everything they lack: unimaginable power, swift revenge, and the cold comfort of eternal life. It offers them the very same bargain it once struck with Jon Morgan, a golden opportunity to right their perceived wrongs, to settle ancient, festering scores, and to unleash a blinding fury upon those who have crossed them.

And some listen. Some always listen. The human heart is a fragile, envious thing, and the dark has a way of finding its cracks.

I am one of the guardians, a member of the silent watchmen who patrol the border between sanity and the abyss. My youth was consumed by the vigil. I have been trained in the cadence of the chant, my throat aching from the harsh, non-human syllables. I have been instructed in the protective rituals, tracing complex geometries in the dust with trembling fingers, and I have been thoroughly indoctrinated into the deeply guarded secrets of our order. I know the shape's true, nameless nature. I know its long, bloody history, and I know its theoretical weaknesses.

But I also know a truth far more terrifying: the shape is patient. It has drifted in the void between

stars for aeons, and it can comfortably wait for aeons more. It will not be permanently defeated by our pathetic, mortal efforts. It can only be delayed, pushed back into the shadows for a season. And one day, when we have inevitably grown weak, distracted, and complacent, it will return to claim what was promised.

"You look tired, child," Elder Thomas had told me only last week, his blind eyes turning toward me in the dim light of the sanctuary. His hands, scarred from old wards that had failed, trembled as he poured herbal tea. "The weight of the watch is a heavy mantle. Do not let your gaze linger too long on the dark, or you will begin to see faces in it."

"I hear them, Thomas," I had whispered, unable to keep the tremor from my voice. "The whispers. They aren't just in the cellar anymore. They're in the wind. They're in the floorboards of my own room."

Thomas had paused, the steam from his cup rising like a pale ghost between us. "The shape does not knock on the front door, boy. It slips in through the cellar of your thoughts. Remember Jon. Remember how he began. He, too, thought he was strong enough to negotiate."

The Morgan house has long been sealed. Its heavy oak doors have been bricked over with grey mortar, and its windows are boarded up with thick, weathered planks of pine, reinforced with iron nails and protective sigils carved deep into the wood. Yet, the cellar remains untouched beneath the rot. The salt circle remains etched into the stone floor, stubborn and unyielding, and the dark symbols remain stained into the damp earth. On certain quiet nights, when the moon is right and the stars align in hostile configurations, I do not need to imagine the cellar. I can hear them. The whispers rise up through the floorboards, bypassing the stone and mortar to echo directly in my mind. They offer promises of absolute power, the seductive call of a clean slate, and the sweet, toxic taste of revenge.

"Just a taste," a voice seems to sigh from the shadows of my room, a voice that sounds horribly like my own, only deeper, richer, and stripped of all fear. "Think of those who ridiculed your family. Think of the peace that comes with absolute control."

I know I must resist. I know with every fibber of my being that the shape's promises are hollow, its offered power a gilded trap, and its revenge a slow-acting poison that inevitably consumes the one who ad-

ministers it. But I am only human, fashioned from fragile clay and fleeting breath, and the lure of the dark is overwhelmingly strong.

Sometimes, my exhaustion betrays me, and I dream of Jon Morgan. In these vivid nightmares, I see him standing tall within the salt circle, his face twisted into a mask of pure, unadulterated hatred. His voice is raised in desperate supplication to ancient powers that should never have been named, let alone invited into our world.

"Take what you will!" Jon screams in my dream, his hands outstretched, blood dripping from his palms where he has sliced them to seal the pact. "Only give me the strength to tear down those who laughed at my ruin! Let them burn as I have burned!"

And then, the air grows impossibly cold. I see the shape answering his frantic call. It does not possess a singular form, but rather manifests as a shifting, oily blackness, a tear in the fabric of the room that swallows the light. It takes a terrible, shifting shape in the darkness, its presence heavy with the scent of ozone, damp earth, and ancient decay. In the dream, I am forced to watch the horror that inevitably followed his capitulation, the silent harvest of innocent souls,

the agonizing descent of the town into madness, and the ultimate, weeping damnation of an entire populace.

But lately, the dream has shifted. A more terrifying variation has begun to take root.

In these newer dreams, Jon is gone. I am the one standing in the center of the damp cellar, the salt beneath my boots ground into useless dust. My own hands are stained with blood, and my own voice rises in a desperate, pleading chant to the void.

"I can fix it," I hear myself scream to the encroaching shadows. "I can protect them all if you just give me the strength! I won't fail like the others!"

I see myself offering my very soul in exchange for a fleeting taste of that cosmic, untamed power. I see myself becoming exactly what Jon became, a hollow puppet, a pathetic fool, a tragic victim of my own desperate thirst for control and retribution.

And when I wake, drenched in a cold, shivering sweat, I am left to wonder in the dark. Is that my true destiny? Is that the tragic fate that was laid out for me by the stars long before I drew my first breath? Is damnation the only future that truly awaits us all?

The shape is still out there. It is always out there, patiently waiting in the long shadows of our fragile world, dreaming its ancient, incomprehensible dreams. It has not been destroyed by our prayers, our salt, or our vigilance, it has only been temporarily contained. And containment, as our order has painfully learned over thirty long years, is never permanent.

Tonight, a fierce wind howls through the narrow, cobbled streets of Ilfort, rattling the windowpanes like a frantic beggar pleading for entry. Tonight, the moon hangs high and heavy, resembling a bloodied copper coin tossed carelessly into the dark velvet of the sky. Tonight, the barrier feels paper-thin.

From deep beneath the floorboards, from the dark, sealed earth beneath the Morgan house, the whispers have returned. They are louder tonight, a seductive, polyphonic song that hums in the bones of my skull. It is the call of the abyss, sweet as honey and cold as grave dirt.

"Come down," the chorus murmurs. *"Why suffer the weight of the world when you can rule it? Why watch when you can act?"*

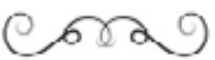
I squeeze my eyes shut, gripping my silver protec-

tive talisman until the metal bites painfully into my palm. I must resist. I must force myself to remember the weeping faces of the survivors, the ash that fell like grey snow, and the absolute horror of the descent. I must remember what became of Jon Morgan when he finally surrendered to the dark.

But the wind continues to howl, the moon continues to bleed, and the darkness is so very patient.

And I am only human.

In the end, we all fall.



VII.

The cellar of the old Morgan house remains sealed beneath heavy baulks of charred timber and rusted iron chains, yet the crude symbols carved into its damp stone walls continue to glow with an inner light that cannot be extinguished. They burn with a faint, sickly violet hue, a colour that does not belong to any natural spectrum. It is a slow, rhythmic pulsation, matching the sluggish, ancient heartbeat of the earth itself—a vibration that speaks of things that were, of terrible things that will be, and of things that should never have been permitted to cross the threshold into our fragile reality. If one presses an ear to the damp, weed-choked earth near the foundations, the timber can be heard groaning, as if the very house is struggling to hold its breath against the pressure of what lies beneath.

In the rain-slicked town of Ilfort, where the autumn mist rises like grey ghosts from the sluggish Miska-

tonic River, the survivors have erected a memorial to those who fell during those desperate, screaming nights. It stands in the very centre of the cobbled town square, an oppressive, monolithic monument of unpolished black stone. Brought down from the desolate, windswept hills beyond Dunwich, the stone seems to actively absorb the pale New England light rather than reflect it, casting a cold shadow that stretches slightly too far, defying the natural geometry of the surrounding buildings.

On its basalt face are deeply incised the names of the lost, the Millers, the Coopers, the Finches, the Harringtons. But at the very pinnacle, in letters that seem to writhe and shift like nesting serpents when viewed in one's peripheral vision, is inscribed the one name that is never spoken aloud:

Jon Morgan

I recall standing before that black obelisk with Constable Thomas as the evening fog rolled in, wrapping its cold fingers around the flickering gas lamps. The smell of wet slate and stagnant river water hung heavy in the air.

"We should have buried him in an unmarked grave out in the salt marshes," Thomas muttered, his voice

trembling as he pulled his woollen collar tighter against the damp chill. “Carving his name here... it feels less like a remembrance and more like an invitation.”

“Perhaps we had no choice, Thomas,” I replied, my eyes fixed on the shifting glyphs of Jon’s name. “The stone demanded it. You heard what the masons said. When they tried to leave his name off the registry, the steel chisels shattered in their hands, and the stone wept a dark, greasy moisture that smelled of sulphur.”

“It’s a warning, then,” he whispered, his knuckles whitening as he gripped his pocket watch. “A warning to any who think of digging up what we buried.”

“Or a prayer,” I said softly, the wind carrying a phantom hum that vibrated in my teeth. “A promise to the shape that it will be welcomed back when the stars align again.”

Some say the monument is a tribute; some say it is a warning. I do not know which is true. Perhaps all of them are true. Perhaps none.

My mind constantly slips back to that final night before we boarded up the cellar. I remember the

flickering, yellow candlelight casting monstrously elongated shadows across the damp stone. Jon had stood on the threshold of the salt-ringed cellar, his eyes hollowed-out pits of shadow, his fingers blackened to the bone by the strange, greasy ash of his rituals.

"You cannot lock it away, you fool," he had whispered to me, his breath smelling of copper and ancient, undisturbed dust. "The lock is a human delusion. We build doors because we are afraid of the endless corridor outside. But the corridor is already inside us. You have seen the shape. You have breathed its vapours. It has a lease on your soul now."

"We can seal you in, Jon," I had yelled over the roaring wind that seemed to blow from nowhere, howling up through the gaps in the floorboards. "We can bury the key under ten feet of concrete!"

He had laughed then, a dry, rattling sound that lacked any human warmth, like dry autumn leaves scraping across a gravestone. "Go on, then. Drive your iron nails. Pile your stones. But every time you close your eyes, you will trace the angles of this room. You will wonder what lies just beyond the wood. And in your curiosity, you will turn the key from the outside."

I did not believe him then. I wanted to believe that the iron chains and the holy water and the salt would hold. But now, in the dead of night, the horror persists. It is a stain on the very fabric of reality, a tear in the weave of our space-time that can never be fully repaired. The whispers continue to drift through the floorboards of my study; the dreams continue to paint my sleep with cyclopean structures of non-Euclidean geometry; the temptation to walk back down that hill and break the rusted chains remains a slow, throbbing fever in my veins.

And one day, perhaps tomorrow, perhaps a thousand years from now, when Ilfort has crumbled to dust and new civilisations rise over our forgotten bones, someone will give in. Someone will hear the low, vibrating hum beneath the soil. Someone will find the rusted latch and open the door.

Perhaps that someone will be me, driven mad by the silence of my own empty house. Perhaps it will be you, holding this very chronicle, feeling the sudden, unexplained draft of cold air on the back of your neck. Or perhaps it will be a child yet unborn, a soul yet unformed, whose mind is a blank slate waiting to be etched by the terrible, forbidden knowledge of what lies beneath.

I close my eyes now, in the quiet dark of my study, and the plaster walls seem to fade away into grey vapour. I see the cellar. I see the glowing circle. I see the shape shifting in the shadow, waiting.

It is always waiting.

And in the end, we all come to the darkness.

In the end, we all become the darkness.

In the end, the darkness consumes us all.

The End

The Wronged One

Ethan Campbell

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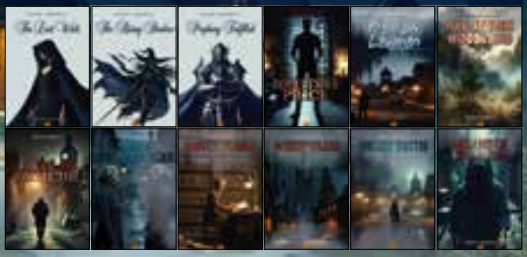
THE WRONGED ONE

Ethan Campbell, natural born stand-up comedian who never made it any further from his toilet's mirror, so he turned into writing fantasy and paranormal stories.



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